'IT'S CLEAR AND PRETTY – BUT I THINK PEOPLE WON'T GET IT'

In an NME exclusive, Radiohead talk for the first time about the dark forces behind 'Hail To The Thief' – which Thom Yorke reckons is their most positive album in years Text: John Robinson Photography: Jason Evans

Back then, they were hailed as the chiefs. Six years ago, Radiohead looked around them at the end of the 20th century, and wrote 'OK Computer', an album that tried to record, if not make sense of, the mess that they found. It was about advertising, extreme politics, planes crashing, fear, brainwashing. About the world as we now know it, although it was mostly paranoia then.

Then they talked in depth about it all. And talked some more. And after a while they found it all became quite insane, and didn't talk to anyone at all. Even their albums became inscrutable to the point of secrecy. But after six years' radio silence Radiohead are back. They're talking about what they've been up to. Talking to *NME*, in fact, about what it all means.

This is what they're saying about their new album. Jonny Greenwood, Radiohead's guitarist, thinks it's like a fairy story – like turning up at a house made of sweets, only to find there's an old woman inside who's eating children. Thom Yorke, Radiohead's singer, nods in agreement and can see his point. But when he thinks about 'Hail To The Thief', he thinks about driving in his car, at dusk, down country lanes.

"I sound like a loony. But there's an awful lot of shadows and malignant forces that are pulling strings at the moment" Thom Yorke

It was here, after all, that he first began to notice it. He doesn't want to sound like a lunatic or anything, but as he drove, as he would do most nights during Radiohead's last six-month break, he found he was entering a dream-like state. It quite tripped his head out, actually.

As he drove, he saw several things under the blue glare of his headlights. The animals running for cover. The strange quality of light at that time of day. But above all, he'd notice the shadows, and it was these particularly that set him thinking.

They set him thinking about 'the gloaming'. Previously he knew this archaic word for 'twilight' as the sort of thing that turned up in sentimental ballads, and as such definitely a bit on the dodgy side – 'Roaming In The Gloaming', all that. As he thought about it some more, though, he began to think it might be more appropriate than he'd first imagined. Already new songs, in various stages of completion, were beginning to circulate between band members. 'The gloaming', with its slightly gloomy suggestion of darkness and the end of the day, might fit in nicely with ideas about the world he was beginning to formulate.

Traditionally, musicians have used the countryside as a place to 'get their heads together'. A year later, with the new Radiohead album 'Hail To The Thief' finished, subtitled, and quite often referred to by him as 'The Gloaming', Thom Yorke is beginning to wonder whether his experience had the opposite effect.

"I sound like a loony," he says, as he sips his coffee outside an Oxford hotel. "But there's an awful lot of shadows and malignant forces that are pulling strings at the moment. It's barely human, it's something that's coming from somewhere else, and that is impossible to control.

"Now I don't know if you have this experience in *your* job," he continues, "but in *my* job you meet people who have ceased to be human. You know how in an office there's always one person who's like this ambitious arsehole who doesn't care who he treads on, they actually think they're doing the right thing? Or if you meet a powerful politician – it's like shaking hands with thin air. The tornado has nothing in the middle. The gloaming to me is exploring this unhealthy darkness, which it seems it's impossible to counteract."

Thom leans back in his chair and grins.

"There you go," he says, with some finality. "Lock me up!"

It might be a dark and shadowy place, but the subject of Radiohead's new album is approached on a beautiful day, in bright sunlight. What's more, it becomes obvious that a suitably summery mood envelops this particular portion of Radiohead. Thom Yorke (large sunglasses, greying beard, dressed in jeans and a bleached denim shirt, altogether looking a bit more like a painter and decorator than a rock star) and Jonny Greenwood (quiet, funny, super-articulate) are, after all, extremely satisfied with what they've just achieved. Happy that it's been completed quickly, in just seven weeks in the studio. Happy that's its vindicated a new working method, but most of all happy that 'Hail To The Thief' is an album, that is, in Thom's two-word estimation of it: "Coherent. Pop."

This 'Hail To The Thief' undoubtedly is, but it's also plenty more besides. Already held up as both a protest album, and an album that signals the band coming to their senses and triumphantly returning to their native land, Guitar Rock, it starts life as a record on which there has been intense speculation, a good deal of which will prove to have been misguided. It's been a highly anticipated album in other ways too, rough versions of its songs having been leaked, three months in advance of its release, onto the internet.

Thom leans over to the 'Security Protected' CD of the album sat on the table before him, points to the ominous skull and crossbones logo and harrumphs loudly.

"Not that bloody secure, though, is it?"

Safe, secure... 'Hail To The Thief', in a more abstract sense, is certainly none of these. 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac' were undoubtedly

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important albums, but this is something else altogether – bigger, at 56 minutes, better for having a wealth of styles that hang together brilliantly. Were statues and monuments and the kind of thing they represent not so completely against the tone of the album, you could say it was 'statuesque' or 'monumental'. As it is, it will probably have to suffice to say that it's the most satisfying and substantial Radiohead album since 'OK Computer'.

And this, in a way, is what's most striking about meeting two of the people who helped to make it. So large is the shadow that Radiohead's music has cast over the last eight years, it's difficult to square their achievements with the people in front of you. Not rude. Not especially charismatic. Not blessed with the self-assurance of accomplished shakers and fakers, instead Radiohead appear to have remained much the same as they ever were. In fact, saving the occasional schoolmasterly, slightly condescending remark like, "What I think you're failing to understand here..." they're more than happy to tell you what they've been up to, and help demystify themselves a bit further. 'Hail To The Thief', they explain, was notable for its absence of dark arts.

"I think," says Thom, "we were feeling more joyful and more positive about where we ended up being. On tour the new songs seemed like – they seemed like songs where everyone knew what was going on much more, it was a much more positive experience, and to me the music sounds much more positive and alive. I don't think it sounds more rock, I just think it sounds more alive.

"We decided we were going to not progress," he smiles. "We were going to take a step left, a step back, a step right a bit, and then forward, then go round in circles."

So it was a different approach to the last two?

"Then, it was more that there was lots of stuff we got into and wanted to try out," he says. "That was it really. After 'OK Computer', it was a case of, 'Been there, done that, bored shitless of it – let's do something else'.

"When we went in the studio before it was one of those classic scenarios that usually split bands up – where there's no preparation and no-one knows what's going on, and it just becomes about being in the studio."

Was it a battle of wills?

"It wasn't really a battle of wills," says Thom, "it was just that everyone thought I was crackers for a bit. Is that a battle of wills? With the last two nobody even knew when the verse was going to break into the chorus. I was insisting on recording absolutely everything, so every act had this reaction and analysis... all this stuff that I should've got out of my system at art college, but I didn't. The whole Can tip – tape everywhere. So much tape. We're contemplating wiping it, because you can't get that type of tape any more."

"I don't think ('Hail To The Thief') sounds more rock, I just think it sounds more alive" Thom Yorke

This time, things were different. Optimistically, or so they thought, the band set themselves a new timetable for their new album. After the last leg of their Amnesiac tour finished in Japan, they would take six months off to develop new ideas. They would then regroup for three months to work them through and rehearse them, and then go on a brief tour to decide how well the songs were shaping up. Only then would they go into the studio with Nigel Godrich and attempt to record what they'd done. This, to their surprise, was what they managed to do, and as a result, says Jonny, it's an album bearing the stamp of the circumstances that led to it being made.

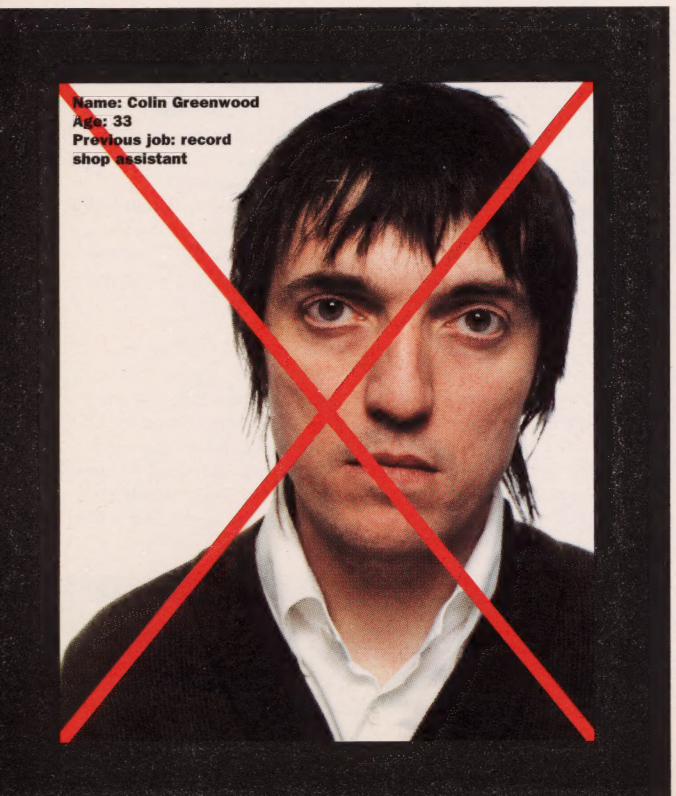
"Everybody had an idea in their head of the songs as musical ideas, but also no idea of how they should be done," he says. "Phil *(Selway, drums)* suggesting that parts be cut out or repeated, or whatever... these are all part of the composing process for us. It's quite hard to explain.

"Us going and playing in a room, it's not something that we worship as being the only way, but it's a great skill that we realise that we have, and for some songs it's a great way to work. But for other songs it can sound flat and just not work, and no big deal."

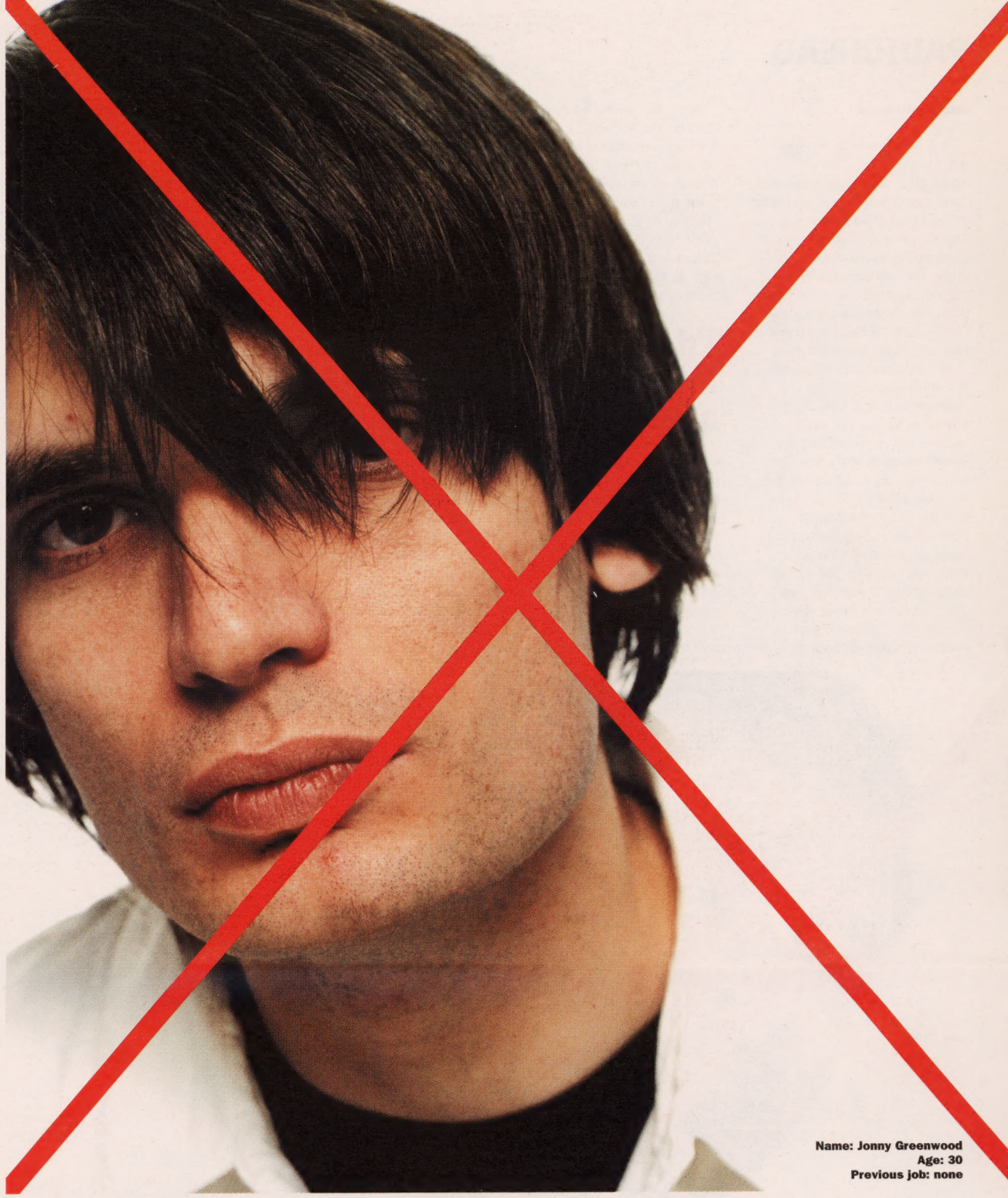
"We had six months to deal with it all," says Thom. "'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac' was us trawling around finding other things to do – but saying that, the end result is always us. We could trawl around for years, and still sound like us."

He pauses, and laughs.

"No matter how hard I try. Heheheheheh!"



Name: Colin Greenwood
Age: 33
Previous job: record shop assistant



Name: Jonny Greenwood
Age: 30
Previous job: none

Thrilling, filled with great rock music... 'Hail To The Thief' undoubtedly sounds like Radiohead. However joyful to make, no matter how satisfying to listen to, though, this is undoubtedly an album with a considerable darkness at its heart.

Jonny listens to it and hears "confusion, avoiding things, looking after yourself and your family". It's a human struggle he's talking about, and it's one that 'Hail To The Thief' records admirably. Always concerned with the fate of the individual in the modern world, over the last three years Radiohead have steadily been making rock music that's more and more about the survival of the fittest and that implicitly ponders the fate of those who get left behind. 'Kid A''s brutal riffing and disturbing ambience, 'Amnesiac''s drowned cats and tough hedges – there's violence everywhere in Radiohead's recent world, natural and man-made in equal measure.

"We all had an idea of the songs in our head, but no idea of how they should be done" Jonny Greenwood

Part of the reason that 'Hail To The Thief' is like this, explains Thom, is because of the noise in his house. As the political events in the world following 9/11 unfolded, he listened to them on the radio, and wrote them down.

"I was listening to lots of Radio 4," he says. "*The Today Programme*, *PM* and *The World At One* every day, and whenever I heard words that rang bells in my head, I'd write them down, until I had this really long list, which is basically much of the artwork."

'Wax Eyes', 'No Way Out' 'Millbank', and of course, 'Gloaming'... the words on Thom's list that find their way onto 'Hail To The Thief''s artwork are set out like placenames on a particularly sinister landscape. George Bush has a 'roadmap' on which he marked out his plans for the Middle East. Here Radiohead have devised one too.

"Except ours is better," chuckles Thom. "More coherent."

Alongside their roadmap, they have for the first time since 'OK Computer' included the lyrics. After the release of that album, Thom found that it had been analysed to such an extent it felt like other people had put so much of themselves into it, it no longer had anything to do with him. After two albums' silence in this respect, he now feels able to face down the interpretative army.

From the album title (a reference to George Bush's election 'win'), to the dark mood in the songs, it's possible to get a first impression of 'Hail To The Thief' as an overtly political album. It is, says Thom, not quite as cut and dried as that.

"The point, which you chaps have failed to grasp, perhaps understandably," he says, "is that I was cutting these things out, and deliberately taking them out of context, so they're like wallpaper.

"Then when I needed words for the songs I'd be taking them out of this wallpaper, and they were out of any political context at all. That was sort of the point. The point was this was very powerful language, but I didn't want to use it to say anything deliberate, because it would just not work.

"If you try and write anything political," he continues, "it's just... shite. Unless you're The Clash, in which case you can get away with it. But we can't, and have no intention of doing."

You were using a cut-up technique instead?

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"It's wasn't heavily thought out," says Thom. "This was the noise going round my house, and so it was the noise that ended up in the songs. This was during the Afghan war and stuff, and lots of it felt wrong. Everything felt wrong. It was like overhearing other people's conversations and having them set something off in your head – I was deliberately trying to take any of the anger out of it.

"It was a shock to me, reading the whole piece through afterwards, that it's so angry – that wasn't really the intention, and I've not really been in that situation before with lyrics. The only reason they end up like they do is because the sounds work with the music. So if the music's not all there to begin with, I'd never get away with it. On the page they read like bad poetry, because that's what they are, they're lyrics to a song, they're not poems. The music's the energy that puts it together.

"With most of the lyrics, like the ones on 'Go To Sleep', I was thinking, 'Well, this is obviously all nonsense, I'll have to rewrite it'. Then there we were in the studio in the day of recording and I hadn't rewritten it yet, so it was, 'Right, that'll have to be it.' And now I look at it, they're the lyrics I'm most proud of. They're involuntary, there was no mandate, no trying to make a statement, but obviously somewhere in the back of my head that was happening.

"I hadn't realised how angry it all was until afterwards," says Thom. "Jonny and I had a chat about it, and it was like, 'Fucking hell...' It wasn't intentional. The whole point was, having written all the songs and music, it wasn't until typing it up that you realise where it came from."

Do you feel a responsibility to be the band recording world events?

"No, absolutely bloody not," fumes Thom. "It's embarrassing. I was making a conscious effort not to do anything like that – but this stuff's in the air."

Jonny gently suggests that there was no 'manifesto' to 'Hail To The Thief.

"I'd like to run for President. Or Prime Minister. I think I could do a better job" Thom Yorke

Thom continues. "We could have done that," he says. "But *that* would have split the band up straight off, I can guarantee you.

"Like, 'OK chaps, we're The Clash! Ready? Go!'"

Radiohead's roadmap has led them instead down alternative, but no less revolutionary avenues. Featuring some of their most impressive rock music (from the album's opener '2+2=5', through 'Go To Sleep' and the epic, Bowie-esque single 'There There'), the album has nonetheless proved a place for Jonny Greenwood to indulge, rather than his inner guitar hero, his inner teenage nerd. Instead of being disempowered by Radiohead's recent shift away from guitar music, Jonny's found it all quite liberating – instead of using other people's computer programmes to find new sounds, he began to write his own.

"My guitar is 11 years old, and my laptop is two years old, my piano is a hundred and something years old," he says. "There's no worship attached to any of them. There are people doing electronic music for whom the thought of recording acoustic sounds would make them run to the toilet with vomit leaking through their fingers, and some guitar bands probably feel the same. We can only use these things in one, fairly limited way. It's partly why we keep moving around and using these different things."

Did they miss rock music?

"The thing about the guitar," says Thom, "is that it has all this baggage attached to it. There's a lot of it about. So I find it difficult to get off on the guitar, and probably always will. But I'm having the same problems with the piano – I only know three tricks and I've used them all now. So now what?"

Jonny is not one to ever plead the superiority of rock.

"There's these shows on Radio 6," he says, "which seem to suggest that unless a song has a guitar intro, then that singer doesn't mean it somehow..."

Thom interrupts.

"I never mean it," he says, triumphantly. "It's all for cash!"

Somewhere in among the guitars and computers, the darkness and the jokes ("There *are* jokes," says Jonny) lies the key to 'Hail To The Thief''s considerable success. Exhilarating though it is, however, it's impossible to shake the shadows that the album brings in its wake. For every sweet tune, there's an idea that leaves a bad taste – the plight of the little man protecting his family, trying to prevent himself from being erased by forces beyond his control. It's this that makes Jonny think that the album's like a Grimm fairy tale. It's this, too, that makes Thom a little worried about the album's fate.

"Here we go," he says. "I'm going to speak the truth. As far as we're concerned, we've made a record we think is very coherent – we think that this is a sparkly, shiny pop record. Clear and pretty. But I think people won't get it, that it won't come across to some people, which is hard to get your head round."

In what way?

"Because in it there's lots of looking to the future and seeing fuck all," he says, "and people don't want to hear it. I don't feel it any more, because I've just finished an album that's about that. But that's probably a very good reason for people not to be interested in this record, if they don't want to hear that atmosphere. I think they should go and buy something else. There's a general sort of fear of the unknown, fear of the future, that it's being jeopardised, that it's extremely difficult to do very much about, because things have been set in motion which seem to be unstoppable. It's something that's there all the way through – in the artwork, there in everything."

But you do your bit, don't you?

"*(With incredible scorn)* No."

You don't think so? Making intelligent rock records that try to say something about it?

Thom mutters something inaudible.

Excuse me?

"That no-one gives a fuck about."

You don't think anyone gives a fuck about them?

"Not *really*," he says. "It's only rock music. You don't write anything thinking, 'This is an important statement', not if you want to carry on writing. You can't take responsibility for the impact or not it's going to have. If you do, you're fucked, you're so fucked, you're so up your arse."

I understand that. But what would you prefer to be doing?

"Well," says Thom, brightening considerably. "I'd like to run for President. Or Prime Minister. I think I could do a better job. I think most people could. That would be my contribution, if anyone's willing to fund me, I'd be down with that."

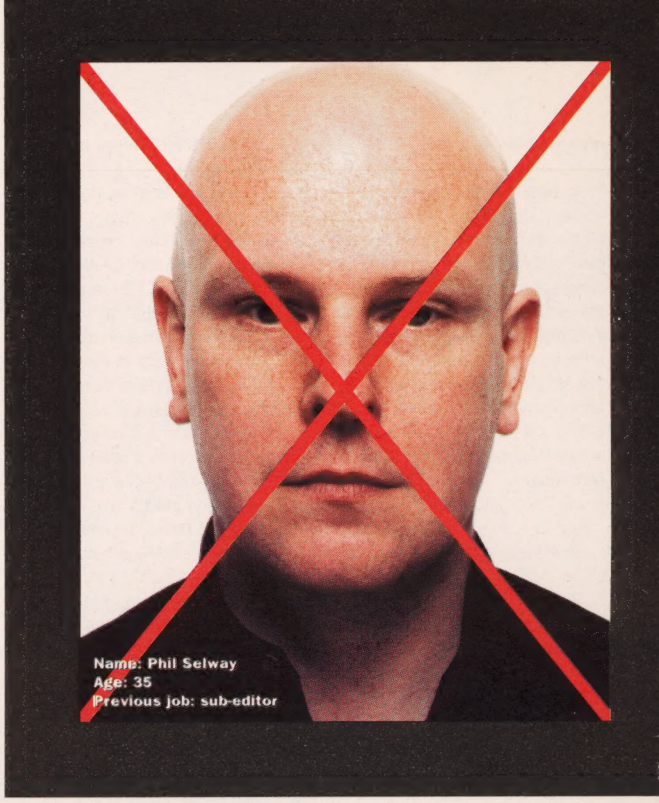
Thom Yorke for PM?

His own question time drawing to a close, Thom leans back in his chair, momentarily satisfied with this concept, if with very little else.

"Yeah."

In the bright morning, the shadows have for the time being, been banished. Still, it's nice that Thom Yorke isn't locked up, or in government just yet. Far better instead that Radiohead be out there in the twilight with us. Roaming, as the old song had it, in the gloaming.

Name: Thom Yorke
Age: 34
Future job: president



Name: Phil Selway
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